

## **A plate-size fried tenderloin sandwich is worth driving hundreds of miles for: feeding Hoosiers' hunger for knowledge**

by Keira Amstutz, president and CEO of the Indiana Humanities Council



**The Indiana Humanities Council** issued a challenge to the residents of Indiana: *picture a table being prepared for a meal. See the colorful dishes crowded together beneath a slight haze of steam. Allow the enticing aromas to summon you closer. Listen as the sound of a spoon scraping on ceramic stirs in you a recollection of family meals from your past. Savor the way your mouth waters with memory and anticipation.*

*What, in your mind's eye, do you see on that table? What do the dishes look like, and what's in them? Who's gathering around that table? Will they sit down, or put food on plates and move to another room to eat? Where did the food come from, and who prepared it? How? Is this feast in honor of a special event, or is it just another meal?*

These evocative images are the basis of the Indiana Humanities Council's *Food for Thought* initiative and have opened the doors to countless new opportunities and relationships for the Indiana Humanities Council. With more than 40 partner organizations that include organizations such as the Indiana Historical Society, Indiana Department of Agriculture and the Indiana Department of Tourism Development, our reach truly is statewide. The presenting sponsor for *Food for Thought* is Indiana's Family of Farmers—a coalition of commodity groups committed to promoting and providing information about Indiana farms and the products they provide. Smaller, more regionally-focused partners include poetry coalitions, school corporations, arts organizations and museums. Funding has been provided by local businesses (both food and non-food related), universities, endowments and foundations.

*Food for Thought* encourages the people of Indiana to think, read and talk about food through events, festivals, public conversations, a traveling exhibit, community gardens and more. We'll consider our personal connections to food as well as global issues surrounding food--issues such as hunger, nutrition, food production and obesity.

Our goal is to get Hoosiers to look beyond simple sustenance to see the culture, history and identity packed into every bite we take. *Food for Thought* is our two-year celebration and examination of food and the role it plays in culture.

Whether it's good Tex-Mex in Austin, a great Philly Cheese Steak in (where else?) Philadelphia, soft-shell crabs in Baltimore, or one of the other flavors people cling to in their hometowns, the stuff we put in our mouth speaks volumes about where we're from and what's in our hearts and heads.

In Indiana, we like to boast about the palate pleasure of our plate-sized fried tenderloin sandwiches. Some of us will drive a hundred miles to eat in a gas station if it has serious tenderloin "cred."

But Indiana's tabletop specialties don't stop at tenderloin sandwiches. In communities where German still shows up on street signs, we savor the *schnitzel* that inspired those sandwiches. Because of our state's agricultural heritage, nearly all of us recognize the headlights of combines pacing across cornfields after dark at harvest time. We know when local tomatoes ripen, when corn is at its best and where to find the freshest herbs.

On a more personal level, like people around the world, we often use food as the centerpiece for family gatherings as well as opportunities to make new friends. Sharing a meal not only nourishes us but also feeds familiarity and understanding. The time around the table becomes a forum for conversations and storytelling, and, as a result, the opportunity for deepening relationships and further revelations.

In addition, food can be our first exposure to an unfamiliar culture. If we delve beyond flavors and dish names, we learn about one culture's agrarian background, another's seaside heritage and yet another's openness to outside influences. We learn about family traditions, cultural rituals and daily routines.

*Food for Thought* will reach Hoosiers at locations throughout Indiana—at county fairs and fine restaurants, in family kitchens and art galleries, in classrooms and libraries, in backyard gardens and farm fields, in new restaurants and historic homes, and in a wide range of venues in the state's biggest cities and smallest towns.

The events and gatherings will range from the small-and-intimate to big-and-bustling. A key catalyst in all of this will be a traveling exhibit featuring a historical and contemporary look at Indiana's food culture. Through it, visitors can see, touch, taste, and hear about food through artifacts, images, hands-on learning tools and an oral-history booth. The exhibit will make stops at most-visited cultural attractions and favorite food and foodie events, as well as local farmers' markets and community

celebrations across the state. Each August the exhibit will have a prominent presence at the Indiana State Fair, which welcomes 1 million visitors.

The traveling exhibit will be complemented by the participation of the many cultural organizations across Indiana that have embraced the initiative. To make food a part of their programming, they've invited artists, academics and others to examine food as a part of their inspired activities. For example, one regional poetry coalition is planning to paint agriculture-inspired poems on barns across Central Indiana and several K-12 schools are conducting literary and historical food-related programs.

Other highlights of the program include a lecture event featuring celebrity chefs Anthony Bourdain and Eric Ripert, and a collaboration with Spirit & Place Festival, a 10-day, multi-site humanities festival that this year has adopted *Food for Thought* as its theme.

*Food for Thought* takes the humanities to the heartland, where Hoosiers grow, process, prepare, cook, eat, share and talk about food. And we invite all of Indiana to join us at the table, as we savor and explore those things that define us, unite us and distinguish us—and enjoy the sights, sounds, aromas, flavors and understanding that can accompany each and every meal.

To learn more about *Food for Thought*, go to [www.foodforthoughtindiana.org](http://www.foodforthoughtindiana.org).